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A Tale of Two Cities: Part 31

Charles Dickens

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES.

In Three Books.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

CHAPTER XV. THE FOOTSTEPS DIE OUT FOR EVER.

Along the Paris streets, the death-carts rumble, hollow and solemn. Six tumbrils carry the day's wine to La Guillotine. All the devouring and insatiate Monsters imagined since imagination could record itself, are fused in the one realisation, Guillotine. And yet there is not in France, with its rich variety of soil and climate, a blade, a leaf, a root, a sprig, a peppercorn, which will grow to maturity under conditions more certain than those that have produced this horror. Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms. Sow the same seed of rapacious licence and oppression ever again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind.

Six tumbrils roll along the streets. Change these back again to what they were, thou powerful enchanter, Time, and they shall be seen to be the carriages of absolute monarchs, the equipages of feudal nobles, the toilettes of flaring Jezabels, the churches that are not my father's house but dens of thieves, the huts of millions of starving peasants! No; the great magician who majestically works out the appointed order of the Creator, never reverses his transformations. "If thou be changed into this shape by the will of God," say the seers to me enchanted, in the wise Arabian stories, "then remain so! But, if thou wear this form through Mere Passing conjuration, then resume thy former aspect!" Changeless and hopeless, the tumbrils roll along.

As the sombre wheels of the six carts go round, they seem to plough up a long crooked furrow among the populace in the streets. Ridges of faces are thrown to this side and to that, and the ploughs go steadily onward. So used are the regular inhabitants of the houses to the spectacles, that in many windows there are no people, and in some the occupations of the hands is not so much as suspended, while the eyes survey the faces in the tumbrils. Here and there, the inmate has visitors to see the sight; then he points his finger, with some thing of the complacency of a curstorus or authorised exponent, to this cart and to this, and seems to tell who sat here yesterday, and who there the day before.

Of the riders in the tumbrils, some observe these things, and all things on their last road-side, with an impassive stare; others, with a lingering interest in the ways of life and men. Some, seated with drooping heads, are sunk in silent despair; again, there are some so heedful of their looks that they cast upon the multitude such glances as they have seen in theatres, and in pictures. Several close their eyes, and think, or try to get their straying thoughts together. Only one, and he a miserable creature of a crazed aspect, is so shattered and made drunk by horror that he sings, and tries to dance. Not one of the whole number appeals, by look or gesture, to the pity of the people.

There is a guard of sundry horsemen riding abreast of the tumbrils, and faces are often turned up to some of them and they are asked some question. It would seem to be always the same question, for, it is always followed by a press of people towards the third cart. The horsemen abreast of that cart, frequently point out one man in it with their swords. The leading curiosity is, to know which is he; he stands at the back of the tumbril with his head bent down, to converse with a mere girl who sits on the side of the cart, and holds his hand. He has no curiosity or care for the scene about him, and always speaks to the girl. Here and there in the long Street of St. Honoré, cries are raised against him. If they move him at all, it is only to a quiet smile, as he shakes his hair a little more loosely about his face. He cannot easily touch his face, his arms being bound.

On the steps of a church, awaiting the coming-up of the tumbrils, stands the Spy and prison-sheep. He looks into the first of them: not there. He looks into the second: not there. He already asks himself, "Has he sacrificed me?" when his face clears, as he looks into the third.

"Which is Évrémonde?" says a man behind him.

"That. At the back there."

"With his hand in the girl's?"

"Yes."

The man cries "Down, Évrémonde! To the guillotine all aristocrats! Down, Évrémonde!"
“Hush, hush!” the Spy exclaims, timidly.

“Who are you, stranger?”

“I am going to pay the forfeit,” it will be paid in five minutes more. Let him be at peace.”

But, the man continuing to exclaim, “Down, Evremonde!” the face of Evremonde is for a moment turned towards him. Evremonde then sees the Spy, and looks attentively at him, and goes his way.

The clocks are on the stroke of three, and the farmer ploughed among the populace is turning round, to come on into the place of execution, and end. The ridges thrown to this side and to that, now crumble in and close behind the last plough as it passes on, for all are following to the Guillotine. In front of it, seated in chairs as in a garden of public diversion, are a number of women, busily knitting. On one of the foremost chairs, stands The Vengeance, looking about for her friend.

“Therese!” she cries, in her shrill tones.

“She is never missed before,” says a knitting-woman of the sisterhood.

“No; nor will she miss now,” cries The Vengeance petulantly, “Therese.”

“Louder,” the woman recommends.

“Loud! Louder, Vengeance, much louder, and still she will scarce bear you. Louder yet, Vengeance, with a little oath or so added, and she will be gone; for they have done their work. Send other women up and down to seek her, lingering, sorer, yet she will scarcely bear thee. Louder yet.”

As The Vengeance descends from her elevation to do it, the tumbrils begin to discharge their loads. The ministers of Sainte Guillotine are robed and ready. Crash!—A head is held out. The supposed Evremonde descends, and the scarnstrace of the first comes up. Crash!—And the knitting-women, never faltering or pausing in their work, count Two.

The second tumbril empties and moves on; the third comes up. Crash!—And the knitting-women count Twenty-Two.

“Do you think?” the uncomplaining eyes in which there is so much endurance, fill with tears, and the lips part a little more and tremble: “I do not think long, to me it is better that you die, and I will be mercifully sheltered.”

“Tell me what it is.”

“I have a cousin, an only relative and an orphan, like myself, whom I love very dearly. She is five years younger than I, and she lives in the country. Poverty parted us, and she knows not my fate, and she is ready to die, in a month, that is, as the clock points counsel, I think my time. I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die.”

“Tell me what it is.”

“Therese!” cries The Vengeance, stamping her foot in the chair, “and here are the tumbrils! And Evremonde will be despatched in a wink, and she not here! See her knitting, with her head, and her empty chair ready for her. I cry with vexation and disappointment!”

“Bad Fortune!” cries The Vengeance, sticking her foot in the chair, “and here are the tumbrils! And Evremonde will be despatched in a wink, and she not here! See her knitting, with her head, and her empty chair ready for her. I cry with vexation and disappointment!”

“But for you, dear stranger, I should not be so composed, for I am naturally a poor little thing of heart; nor should I have been able to raise my thoughts to Him who was put to death, that we might have hope and comfort here-to-day. I think you were sent to me by Heaven.”

“One on to me,” says Sydney Carton. “Keep your eyes upon me, dear child, and mind no other object.”

“I mind nothing while I hold your hand. I shall mind nothing when I let it go, if they are rapid.”

“They will be rapid. Fear not!”

The two stand in the fast-thrashing throng of victims, but they speak as if they were alone. Eye to eye, voice to voice, hand to hand, heart to heart, these two children of the Universal Mother, else so wide apart and differing, have come together on the dark highway, to repair home together and to rest in her bosom.

“Brave and generous friend, will you let me ask you to be that benefactress in me, who is so ignorant, and it troubles me—just a little.”

“Tell me what it is.”

“I have a cousin, an only relative and an orphan, like myself, whom I love very dearly. She is five years younger than I, and she lives in a farmer’s house in the south country. Poverty parted us, and she knows not of my fate—

“Tell me what it is.”

“What I have been thinking as we came along, and what I am still thinking now, is this:—If the Republic really does good to the poor, and they come to be less hungry, and in all ways to suffer less, she may live a long time; she may even live to be old.”

“What then, say gentle sister?”

“Do you think?” the uncomplaining eyes in which there is so much endurance, fill with tears, and the lips part a little more and tremble: “I do not think long, to me it is better that you die, and I will be mercifully sheltered.”

“It cannot be, my child there is no Time.

“No; nor will she miss now,” cries The Vengeance, petulantly, “Therese.”

“Louder.”

“Loud! Louder, Vengeance, much louder, and still she will scarce bear you. Louder yet, Vengeance, with a little oath or so added, and she will be gone; for they have done their work. Send other women up and down to seek her, lingering somewhere; and yet, although the messengers have come together on the dark highway, to repair home together and to rest in her bosom.

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that it was the peacefulest man's face ever beheld there. Many said that he looked sublime and prophetic.

One of the most remarkable sufferers by the same ace—a woman—had sought at the foot of the same scaffold, not long before, to be allowed to write down the thoughts that were inspiring her. Had she given any utterance to his, and they were prophetic, they would have been these:

"I see Barsad, and Cly, Defarge, The Vengeance, the Juryman, the Judge, long ranks of the new oppressors who have risen on the destruction of the old, perishing by this retributive instrument, before it shall cease out of its present use. I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and, in their struggles to be truly free, in their triumphs and defeats, through long years, to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out.

"I see the fires for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy, in that England which I shall see no more. I see her, an old woman, weeping and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence. I see her, an old man, so long their friend, in ten years' time, and passing tranquilly to his reward.

"I see that I hold a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence. I see her, an old woman, weeping for me on the anniversary of this day. I see her and her husband, their course done, lying side by side in their last earthly bed, and I know that each was not more honoured and held sacred in the other's soul, than I was in the souls of both.

"I see that child who lay upon her bosom and bore my name, a man, winning his way up, illustrious there by the light of his, and prophetic imagination that may become a part of English Literature.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE.

PREFACE.

This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and of what a Man's resolution can achieve.

If the machinery of the Law could be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry, with moderate assistance only from the lubricating influences of oil of gold, the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share of the public attention in a Court of Justice. But the Law is still, in certain inevitable cases, the pre-engaged servant of the long purse; and the story is left to be told, for the first time, in this place. As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now. No circumstance of importance, from the beginning to the end of the disclosure, shall be related on hearsay evidence. When the writer of these introductory lines (Walter Hartright, by name) happens to be more closely connected than others with the incidents to be recorded, he will describe them in his own person. When his experience fails, he will retire from the position of narrator; and his task will be continued, from the point at which he has left it, by other persons who can speak to the circumstances under notice from their own knowledge, just as clearly and positively, as he has spoken before them.

Thus, the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness—with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its direct and most intelligible aspect; and to trace the course of one complete series of events, by making the persons who have been most closely connected with them, at each successive stage, relate their own experience, word for word.

Let Walter Hartright, teacher of drawing, aged twenty-eight years, be heard first.

THE NARRATIVE OF WALTER HARTRIGHT, OF CLEMENT'S-INN, LONDON.

I. It was the last day of July. The long hot summer was drawing to a close; and we, the weary pilgrims of the London pavement, were beginning to think of the cloud-shadows on